

# The Reader: Entering into history light-mindedly

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Stephen Daldry, screenplay by David Hare, based on the book by Bernhard Schlink*

"How do you live in the shadow of modern history's greatest crime? Can a generation come to terms with the unforgivable sins of its elders? Or are some legacies too overwhelming to comprehend, too evil to accept, too terrible to ever recover from?"

These questions introduce the production notes of *The Reader*, the new film directed by Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliot*, *The Hours*). The movie, adapted from the 1995 bestselling novel by Bernhard Schlink, attempts to examine the psychic disturbances associated with coming of age in Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Although this is an entirely legitimate and even welcome subject for investigation, *The Reader* is not up to the task. The work is essentially a contrivance that toys with the notion of German collective responsibility for the crimes of fascism.

Shuffling between three time frames in post-World War II Germany, the film's initial segment begins in 1958, when 15-year old Michael (David Kross) falls ill outside the apartment of tram conductor Hanna (Kate Winslet), who is more than twice his age. An affair soon begins between them. Without much finesse, Hanna ritualistically takes baths and makes love with Michael, whom she calls "kid." In turn, the deeply affected boy breaches the older woman's stoic exterior when, at her insistence, he begins to read the classics aloud to her. One day Hanna simply disappears.

Nearly a decade later, Michael, now a law student, attends a war crimes trial with his professor (Bruno Ganz) and fellow classmates. In the dock, along with five other middle-aged women, is Hanna. The defendants, former concentration camp guards, are being tried for allowing hundreds of their female prisoners to die in a fire caused by a bomb during the evacuation of the camp. (There are remote overtones of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in the film's framework.)

Hanna is emotionless and robotic as she defends her actions and exhibits little consciousness about her decision to join the SS. Meanwhile, the law students debate the culpability of the German population ("There were thousands of camps, everyone knew."). A secret that Hanna has carefully guarded becomes clear to Michael. Revealing it would have a bearing

on the length of her prison term, but he remains silent.

Decades later, a guilt-ridden, emotionally crippled Michael (Ralph Fiennes) tapes readings of books and sends them to Hanna. With their help and the help of the prison library, she gains in humanity and thereby becomes more aware of the depth and nature of her wrongdoings.

Unfortunately, *The Reader* makes for stilted drama. Despite glossy production values and well-known, talented performers, the film never allows itself to properly breathe, lest it be accused of showing too much sympathy for a Nazi matron, who is victimizer but also part victim. Lacking the capacity to work through the issue, the movie forces its characters to dance on the head of a pin and maneuver between being human and non-human. Winslet tries her best, but Fiennes is morose and lifeless.

More importantly, the movie falters artistically in part because its characters undertake the impossible, to shoulder personally the blame for German fascism. The effort to shove the various personae into this structure must bend them out of all recognizable shape.

*The Reader's* cast members are asked, in effect, to embody the film's essential premise, that the sum-total of individual German psychologies, adding up to a state of national passivity and blindness, was to blame for the extermination of the Jews.

No actor could do that, because it wipes out a complex historical process—especially the various concerted attempts at revolution in Germany between 1918 and 1923, and the subsequent degeneration of the mass Communist Party in particular—and the personalities produced by that process. It replaces the latter with contrived, schematic figures who are expected to somehow stand for "fatally flawed Germans."

(The film is light-minded in various directions. Is it possible that Hanna would have been so little affected by her transition from tram conductor to Nazi death-camp attendant and back as to be open to the subtleties of great literature?)

The responsibility for Nazism lay with the German ruling class in its mortal crisis and the failure of the official leadership of the working class (social democratic and Stalinist) to show a way out of that crisis. A beaten and demoralized population became vulnerable to any number of crimes.

Individual human beings, of course, are responsible for what

they do, but treated outside or apart from that general historical understanding, considerations of their collective guilt or innocence have little value.

There was a widespread understanding in an earlier day that European fascism was a response to the dangers represented by social revolution, that a relationship between capitalism and Nazism existed.

Such an understanding has largely been lost, and not only by Daldry and company.

Thus the film's crudely-etched characters speak to the present cultural stagnation and, to be blunt, historical ignorance. The artist enters the past through the present. A superficial, complacent attitude towards the present makes for a similar attitude towards the past. Bereft of a genuine comprehension of its complex and painful subject matter, *The Reader* must resort to a form of cheap moralizing.

Films like Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and Visconti's *The Damned* drew connections between fascism and its powerful backers in the German ruling class. Even a blackly comic effort such as Lubitsch's *To be or Not to Be* or certain scenes in that product of official Cold War liberalism, Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg*, were able to present fascism as the war of the rich and powerful against the poor and oppressed. Spielberg's *Schindler's List* contributed, at least in its opening sections, to a more serious appraisal of the Holocaust.

And as to *The Reader's* implication that the German population passively bowed to the fascist regime, any solid look at the historical record dispels this myth. For example, historian F.L. Carsten describes the popular response to Hitler's coming to power:

"Large numbers responded by forming underground groups, producing and distributing underground leaflets and papers and disturbing Nazi propaganda as best they could. In 1933 and 1934 hundreds of clandestine groups sprang up all over Germany—and quite often they were equally liquidated by the Gestapo ... It has been reliably estimated that the KPD [German Communist Party] between 1933 and 1935 lost 75,000 members through imprisonment and that several thousand of them were killed. That means that about a quarter of the members registered in 1932 were lost." (Quoted by David North in "Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust: A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*")

North goes on to state that "[t]he Nazi terror intimidated and cowed millions of Germans. Large sections of the working class, dejected and demoralized by the shameful collapse of its organizations, retreated into apathy. Yet, even in the face of the merciless brutality of the Nazis, there was significant active opposition to the regime among workers."

In the final analysis, the Holocaust was the price paid, not just by the Jewish people, but all of humanity, for the failure of the working population, betrayed by its leading organizations, to overthrow capitalism.

Also skewed in *The Reader* is its treatment of culture and

what the production notes call "the deeply transformative power of words and literacy." These are worthy issues, but, again, approached very inadequately.

The film implies that if Hanna had been more cultivated early in life, she might not have become a participant in the Nazis' crimes. While that may or may not have been the case, it was decidedly not a lack of culture, in the general sense, within the German masses that contributed to the victory of fascism. In fact, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the country's population was one of the most cultured on the planet, having produced and been nourished on Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Lessing, Schiller and Goethe, not to mention Kant, Hegel, Marx and Engels.

German social democracy organized countless concerts, readings and other cultural events for workers. That, in the end, didn't prevent the organization's growing opportunism.

The movie misses the point. What's needed is not individual self-education, as such, but the collective raising of the consciousness of masses of people in regard to the social mechanisms and institutions that dominate their lives. Art and culture play a critical role in that general process of *social* sensitization. Far from being a tool merely for self-improvement, much less self-flagellation, true art is profoundly critical of the present social order and its anti-human character. That is its most transformative power. (In *Billy Elliot*, Daldry argued that culture is a device by which an individual can escape from—not understand or fight to change—the physical and emotional destruction of a Yorkshire mining community.)

*The Reader* is the latest in a spate of films about the Holocaust or the Nazi era. Their failings recently prompted the *Nation's* film critic Stuart Klawans to comment, "By continually replaying and reframing and reinventing the past, these movies are starting to cloud the very history they claim to commemorate."

The answer, however, is not a "moratorium on Holocaust films," as Klawans half-jokingly and "respectfully" requests, but to create deeper, richer, more accurate works.

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